

From: [Edlund, Carl](#)
To: [Broyles, Ragan](#); [Martin, John](#); [Enders, Jhana](#); [McQuiddy, David](#)
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From: Gray, David
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To: Curry, Ron; Coleman, Sam; Edlund, Carl; Stenger, Wren; Blevins, John
Subject: AP - Williams

Louisiana plant blast leaves 1 dead, 77 injured
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Cause of explosion is unknown, but FBI says terrorism not suspected

BY STACEY PLAISANCE — Associated Press

Geismar, LA — A ground-rattling explosion Thursday at a chemical plant in Louisiana ignited a blaze that killed one person and injured dozens of others, authorities said. Witnesses described a chaotic scene of flames as high as 200 feet in the air and workers scrambling over gates to escape the plant.

A thick plume of black smoke rose from the plant even after the fire had been extinguished. At a roadblock several miles away, where family members waited anxiously to hear about loved ones, flames were still visible above the trees hours after the blast.

Louisiana's health department said 77 people were treated at hospitals, with 51 released by evening. Hospitals reported that workers mostly suffered burns, bruises, and cardiac and respiratory issues, health department spokeswoman Christina Stephens said in a news release. Hazardous-materials crews going through the aftermath of the blast at the facility found a body, state police Capt. Doug Cain said. Police identified the man killed as 29-year-old Zachary C. Green, of Hammond, La.

Tulsa-based Williams Cos., which owns the plant, said the blast happened at 8:37 a.m. By afternoon, all of the plant's more than 300 workers had been accounted for, Cain said. The plant is in an industrial area of Geismar, a Mississippi River community about 20 miles southeast of Baton Rouge.

The plant makes ethylene and propylene — highly flammable gases that are the basic building blocks in the petrochemical industry. The Williams facility is one of scores of chemical and industrial facilities that dot the riverside between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. A few homes and four other plants are located within two miles, said Lester Kenyon, spokesman for the government of Ascension Parish, where Geismar is.

The cause was not immediately known, but the FBI said terrorism was not suspected. A contract worker, Daniel Cuthbertson, 34, described a scene of "mass hysteria" immediately after the explosion, with workers scrambling over gates to get out of the plant.

"God was with me today because I know when I looked back, I barely made it. I know somebody was hurt. There's no way everybody escaped that," Cuthbertson said while at an emergency staging area about two miles from the plant.

At nearby Dutchtown High School, football players were doing conditioning exercises outdoors when they heard the boom. Students were rushed inside, and the school went into emergency lockdown.

"My biggest concern is that I'm hoping none of our players or students had parents who worked in that plant and were injured. That's my main thing," said Benny Saia, the school's athletic director and head football coach.

More than 300 people were evacuated from the site, but some stayed behind, officials said. Ten workers remained in an explosive-proof control center as the fire raged, Cain said. The workers performed vital tasks, including shutting valves, that rendered the plant safe, he said. Residents several miles from the plant described feeling the ground shaking.

"It felt like a three-second earthquake. It was a massive explosion," said state Sen. Troy Brown, who lives several miles from the plant. Unsure what was happening, he drove to a gas station down the street and saw flames shooting 100 to 200 feet in the air. "It was scary," he said. Officials at area hospitals said a handful of patients were in critical or serious condition, though most seemed to have minor injuries.

Early tests did not indicate dangerous levels of any chemicals around the plant after the blast, but Cain said air monitoring continued Thursday afternoon.

Cain said the fire was extinguished, but gas was being flared — burned at the top of high chimneys — in other parts of the plant. "There is still some controlled flaring going on, so people in the area are going to see smoke," he said.